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Writing in a Country at War

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Bilal TANWEER

Writing in a Country at War

Sa'adat Hasan Manto, widely considered to be the greatest short story writer from the Indian subcontinent, has a story called *The Dog of Tetwal*. Set against the backdrop of the Partition of India, it tells the story of a dog in the border region of the two newly created countries. The dog appears one day when Indian soldiers are having breakfast. One soldier takes a liking to it, names it Chapad Jhunjhun, and gives it a biscuit. Just then, it occurs to one of the other officers that this dog could be Pakistani dog since it had approached them from the Pakistani side of the border. They ask the dog to prove his identity. The dog wags its tail.

One young soldier, digging the heel of his boot into the ground, said, 'Dogs, too, better now make up their minds as to whether they're Indian or Pakistani.'

Harnam Singh removed another biscuit from his satchel and threw it in the direction of the dog. 'And like the Pakistanis, their dogs, too, will be blown away.'

Another soldier shouted: 'Long Live India!'

So the dog is made to scuttle back to the Pakistani side where Pakistani soldiers find him strapped with a label "Chapad Jhunjhun: This is an Indian dog." That angers them because the dog had been living with them for the last few days. They replace its tag with another one, "Sapad Sunsun: this is a Pakistani dog," and tell the dog to take the announcement back to the Indian side.

You know how this story ends.

The dog is shot dead by soldiers on both sides. It dies on the piece of land that is neither Pakistan nor India.

*

Over the last few years, as I have waded deeper into writing and fiction, the question I have been grappling with involves the relationship between life and literature: what it means to write, what can/does it do for us, and why write/tell stories. This divide between life and literature has become one of the chief investigations of my fiction. I think this is largely because I live and work in a place where I have never been able to take literature for granted. To write always means a constant battle with a world that believes that writing ultimately is futile—and yet, Pakistan seems to be the most dangerous country for journalists and writers.¹

Here's what I have understood: the first and most fundamental function of power is the exact same as that of the writer: to re-imagine the world. Power makes up new causes and histories, and maps its vision upon the world using violence. It cracks the world into races and civilizations, nations and religions, and funnels money into think tanks and experts who imagine these fissures and histories into being complete with data and numbers. But while power invents narratives to legitimize itself and its violence, writers strive for something else, something more basic and truer: they create experience. The space that writers invent is not a didactic or coercive space. It is a space you enter to open yourself up and engage with other

¹ Reporters Without Borders, *THE 10 MOST DANGEROUS PLACES FOR JOURNALISTS* - Published, 21 December 2011: <http://en.rsf.org/annualoverview-21-12-2011,41582.html>

ways of being. It is a space for empathy. To write, in other words, is to invent new ways of seeing the world.

In that sense, writers are always in conflict with power because power insists that you choose sides. That there are only two ways of seeing the world. That the world is us and them. That's why writers chafe those in power because they insist that the shape of the world is not the one they are being led to believe.

Writers know this most acutely because they know that stories are usually just that—stories. Truth is the place we imagine collectively when we share and believe stories. Truth is something marvelous and amazing because it allows us a common way to imagine ourselves, a way to communicate with the same references and things. Writers also know that this space is dangerous because it can be—it is—exploited by power that wants to monopolize this imaginative space between people. Writers and power are in conflict because while power exercises violence to harden its narratives and mark boundaries around them, writers work to loosen and broaden those narratives.

Power obliterates histories; simplifies discomfiting complexities of the world; and flattens the paradoxes of human existence. It complicates what is simple and simplifies what is complicated. It leads you to believe that wars only mean glory; terrorism only means suicide bombing; and that drones are precision instruments, just like search operations. It tells you stories to convince you that barriers and barricades, guns and gates are for your own safety. That racial profiling makes us all safer. It tells you that if you raise questions, you harm national interest and bring national institutions—the only guarantors of your security and safety—into disrepute. Power instructs you that the history of all wars began one September day when they started hating our freedoms. Or that Pakistan started coming into being the moment first Arab conqueror stepped on the Indian subcontinent in eighth century CE. Power tells you that Hindus and Muslims are fundamentally and irreconcilably different nations.

Writers live in the cracks of these narratives: between fundamentalisms, nationalisms, and ideologies. David Foster Wallace once said, "To write is to feel like a fucking human being." Writers, like all of us, are trying to comprehend the world—but they take little for granted. They set out to create the world anew. They insist that "If you set out on a journey let it be long/ wandering that seems to have no aim groping your way blindly/ so you learn the roughness of the earth not only with your eyes/ but by touch/ so you confront the world with your whole skin." (Zbigniew Herbert, "Journey.")

*

So is it any surprise that one day a gentleman from the US Embassy visited Manto and offered him five hundred rupees for a story? (The going rate, by the way, was fifty rupees; and he was the highest paid Urdu writer.) Manto, who was desperately in need of money for his alcohol, knew that the gentleman would not be pleased with what he'd write. So he did the decent thing, accepting only three hundred rupees with the caution that the gentleman might not like the story. What Manto wrote became the famous "Letters to Uncle Sam."

In these letters from an obedient nephew to his Uncle Sam, the nephew tells his Most Respected Uncle many things, including that he hates the locally blended whiskey, that American women are beautiful. But he also says: "[My] admiration and respect for you are going up at about the same rate as your progress towards a decision to grant military aid to Pakistan." He gives his Uncle some advice: "[You] must sign a military pact with Pakistan because you are seriously concerned about the stability of the world's largest Islamic state, since our mullah is the best antidote to Russian communism. Once military aid starts flowing, the first people you should arm are these mullahs." A few lines later, he looks Uncle Sam in the

eye: "I think the only purpose of military aid is to arm these mullahs. I am your Pakistani nephew and I know your moves. Everyone can now become a smart ass, thanks to your style of playing politics."²

Manto wrote this in 1954, when the world was cut up in other ways and power was telling us different stories about who we need to wage a war against.

Between power and war, there are always the writers.

Appendix (Bilal Tanweer)

Reality Demands by Wisława Szymborska

Reality demands
that we also mention this:
Life goes on.
It continues at Cannae and Borodino,
at Kosovo Polje and Guernica.

There's a gas station
on a little square in Jericho,
and wet paint
on park benches in Bila Hora.
Letters fly back and forth
between Pearl Harbor and Hastings,
a moving van passes
beneath the eye of the lion at Chaeronea,
and the blooming orchards near Verdun
cannot escape
the approaching atmospheric front.

There is so much Everything
that Nothing is hidden quite nicely.
Music pours
from the yachts moored at Actium
and couples dance on the sunlit decks.

So much is always going on,
that it must be going on all over.
Where not a stone still stands,
you see the Ice Cream Man
besieged by children.
Where Hiroshima had been
Hiroshima is again,
producing many products

² This paragraph has been paraphrased from this wonderful piece, "The Seer of Pakistan" by Ali Sethi in the New Yorker blog – Aug 30, 2012: <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2012/08/the-seer-of-pakistan.html>

for everyday use.
This terrifying world is not devoid of charms,
of the mornings
that make waking up worthwhile.

The grass is green
on Maciejowice's fields,
and it is studded with dew,
as is normal grass.

Perhaps all fields are battlefields,
those we remember
and those that are forgotten:
the birch forests and the cedar forests,
the snow and the sand, the iridescent swamps
and the canyons of black defeat,
where now, when the need strikes, you don't cower
under a bush but squat behind it.

What moral flows from this? Probably none.
Only that blood flows, drying quickly,
and, as always, a few rivers, a few clouds.

On tragic mountain passes
the wind rips hats from unwitting heads
and we can't help
laughing at that.

Translated from the Polish by Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh